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ABSTRACT

This booklet describes the guidelines, activities, and problems of a program designed to facilitate parent participation in a day care center. The program revolves around a weekly parent visit (the "Family Hour") during which parents are encouraged to relax, enjoy themselves and observe the children at play. Benefits to parents and staff are outlined and guidelines for implementing the parent participation plan, writing invitations, choosing a suitable time, and other practical ideas are discussed. Suggested activities for the parent group include storytelling, trip planning and puppet and theater making. The booklet concludes with a look at some of the problems, pitfalls, and adverse reactions and the retrospective recommendations, evaluations, and comments of staff members involved in the "Family Hour." (GO)

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# The FAMILY HOUR

## An Experiment In Parent Involvement

by

**Joseph Corrado**

Deputy Director
for the
Play Schools Association, Inc.

PS 008 127

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**The Play Schools Association**

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## DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to the memory of Jean Schick Grossman who was responsible for Play Schools Association's Family Life and Parent Involvement Programs. Her wisdom, leadership and humor, as well as her work with children and their families were an inspiration to all of us at Play Schools Association.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Joseph Corrado, B.S.-M.S., is Deputy Director of Play Schools Association. Over the past 18 years he has worked in the field of parent education, special education and teacher training. He has organized, developed and coordinated pilot programs such as the one at Mills College which is described in this book. He has conducted on-site, in-service educational and training programs for schools, hospitals, detention centers, institutions, child development agencies, day care centers, and day camps for both normal and handicapped children.*



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# INTRODUCTION

Parents participating in programs which serve their children has become an accepted fact of the past decade. Means of achieving this participation vary from organization to organization. Play Schools Association suggests the Family Hour as one method of achieving greater parental input for organizations interested in doing so.

The following information evolved out of an experiment conducted jointly by Play Schools Association, the Mills College of Education and the Division of Day Care, New York City Department of Welfare. This pilot study was aimed at developing a richer, more satisfying program for school-age youngsters in a New York City Day Care Center. In the selected Centers where the program was initiated as a weekly event, reports point to the cementing of a strong productive bond between the Center and parents. The idea can be modified to fit most programs serving children.

FRANK DONNELLY
*EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR*



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# THE FAMILY HOUR

**An Experiment In Parent Involvement**

The old tired cliches heard at parent meetings – "We like you, we want you, we need you," have worn thin and are meaningless. Today's parents are not impressed by such expressions; they want more concrete evidence of a Center's staff being interested and concerned with a partnership which is needed in working to help children. This feeling of mutual acceptance can rarely be communicated through word – it calls for something stronger, i.e., a visual demonstration, in work and play, that can exist between staff, parents and children. The "Family Hour" has proved an excellent way to demonstrate this.

For the "Family Hour" parents are invited to the Center to relax, enjoy themselves and get to know their children in an environment that is pleasant and devoid of pressure. The parents observe the children at play, join in their activities, and informally talk with the staff about their interests as well as their problems. They often seek advice and they often offer suggestions.

Such experiences indicate a three-fold effect on parents: enhanced status through group acceptance and through recognition of them as individuals with something to contribute; better understanding of their children's abilities, needs and problems; a closer, friendlier relationship with the Center's staff. For the staff, it helps cement a partnership with the parents which results in benefitting the children; it results in a direct line of communication between the Center and the home, and it provides a source of additional information and ideas for developing a richer program.



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## GENERAL GUIDELINES:

Prepare the children for the fact that they can anticipate having visitors. Try to do it in such a way that the children are not embarrassed or do not feel left out in the event their parents do not respond.

The next step is to send written invitations to the parents to visit the Center for a "Family Hour" and to enjoy a cup of coffee while observing the children at play. Parents who are somewhat timid often find this sort of invitation non-threatening since it implies their only function is to sip coffee and observe their children. And it well might be that *is* their only function. However, there will be others who will become an active part of the group immediately. Your cue should be to give something to parents rather than to ask something. You give them coffee, you give them a chance to observe how their children are doing, you give them a chance to be comfortable by participating or to be comfortable *not* participating. Finally, you give them an opportunity to be with their children and to relax at the end of the work day. In time, the parents can begin to recognize the "Family Hour" as a carefree interim between the hours of work and the time they resume family duties. Parents will respond in various ways: some, if encouraged by the teachers, will participate freely with clay, paints, puzzles, blocks and housekeeping play equipment; others will just watch and talk. A few parents may want and need time to work alone or with other parents at a particular project. There may be times when conversation becomes personal and inappropriate for the children's ears; if so, you may want to continue the discussion in privacy.

The *time* of the "Family Hour" must be given prime consideration. Make sure the "Family Hour" is held every week on the same day at the same time. Between 5 and 6 o'clock is a good time, so is the hour between 5:30 and 6:30. Evening meetings, as many of us have learned, often prove difficult for parents to attend; however, the idea of staying longer than the children's pick-up time can have instant appeal. (In Play Schools' experiment, the idea was so appealing that the "Family Hour" was eventually extended for an additional half hour.) Getting a "Family Hour" started requires little expenditure of money – it often pays off in greater understanding for staff, children and the parents themselves.



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## PRACTICAL IDEAS

*Coffee Time* – One section of the area can be set aside for a coffee urn operated on a self-service basis. This can provide a natural bridge from shyness and isolation to contact with others. The coffee time may also be used by parents and staff for an informal conference since this is an easy way to approach and iron out difficulties on both sides as well as to discuss the children, to propose new projects, and for the parents to become more thoroughly acquainted, both with the Center's activities and with each other.

*Useful Materials and Equipment* – The following items offer a wide range of educational and recreational possibilities: books, paints, colored paper, wood, clay, simple woodworking tools, a camera, typewriter, sewing machine, a scrap-bag of fabrics contributed by parents and local merchants, if possible; simple cooking facilities, a not-too-delicate record player and records, musical instruments, tape recorder, slides and movies. Children and parents are able, with proper guidance, to create and present plays and musical shows, to write poems, tales, or to compile a class newspaper, to make films and to take still pictures. They can use the results in many ways, from putting on an exhibit to "publishing" a class book. Costumes can be created, sets built and painted, music played and danced to, ethnic, and national holidays celebrated in a colorful and enjoyable manner, (food especially prepared for the occasion is usually a big hit).

*Remember:* very few organizations can boast all of the above mentioned materials and equipment; however, adaptability and inventiveness on the part of staff and parents can be an excellent substitute for lavish supplies.

*Parent Information* – Keep an up-to-date bulletin board in a well-lighted area of the Center. Post information about movies, plays, concerts, television-radio programs, sales and free activities of all kinds, both in and out of the neighborhood; lists of special events and opportunities for participation; cartoons, pictures and posters to amuse and inform parents on a wide selection of subjects; invitations to events at the Center and elsewhere; displays of work done by parents and children; information on health facilities, counseling services, baby sitters and recreation possibilities.

*Set An Accepting Tone* – Some parents feel threatened by a large group. (A teacher can intimidate them without being aware of it.) Parents' feelings of inadequacy because of background, socio-economic status, language difficulties, etc., can frequently emerge and inhibit them. In some situations, it is felt advisable to start such parents off on a one-to-one basis – i.e. one



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teacher talking to a parent in complete privacy. This can accomplish several things: parents realize that their opinions and knowledge are valued; that no one is judging them; that the teacher doesn't necessarily know all the answers; and, most of all, that they are welcome.

*Don't Just Listen: Hear What Parents Say* – It is not uncommon that a great variety of information emerges during "Family Hour" sessions. Some of it will be of a personal nature and the teacher may have to use quick judgment in deciding how to handle this. Questions concerning the child and his attitudes should be answered only if the teacher honestly feels competent to do so. Don't be afraid to say "I don't know." Many problems are clearly outside the teacher's bailwick. (Without being overly solicitous, try to give full and sympthetic attention to the parent who simply needs a listener.)

*Enable Non-English-Speaking Parents to Participate* – The question of language, while occasionally awkward, can usually be handled with a considerable degree of tact. If there is a total barrier of communication, patience and understanding will go at least part of the way; and if another parent can be brought into the situation to translate, everyone can benefit. For those cases in which both people know at least something of each other's language, it becomes largely a matter of individual judgment as to how you proceed. If a staff member speaks the parent's language fluently, the situation is again different and more relaxed, since it usually helps an insecure parent feel more at home. It is important to realize, however, that there is no perfect or undisputed answer to this question. Individual temperament, mood, intuition, humor and intelligence must be taken into consideration. Some teachers use gestures while others will depend upon a dictionary. The following anecdote shows one way of getting around the language barrier: A father, shy at first because of his halting English, refused to become involved in the Center's activities. When he saw his son's puppet, however, he allowed himself to be slowly drawn into the craft area. Finally, persuaded to try his skill, he made one of his own. He was happy with the results and the child was delighted. In this case, the teacher had provided active participation. To a considerable degree, this can relieve the tension created by the language barrier.

*Observation of Children at Work and Play* – This has often proved to be most revealing to parents. They are able to learn about themselves as they watch their children at play. When children are role-playing, they will often imitate parental behavior. Sometimes this is flattering, sometimes not. It is almost always enlightening.



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During a discussion session, the question of observation came up. One mother, after watching her child at play, exclaimed, "I saw the way my child mimics me – my scolding tone – I guess I get too impatient." Observation gives the parents an excellent opportunity to see a good example of teacher-child interaction. Through this type of informal observation (and participation with their own and other children) parents gain concrete insights into the intellectual content of children's play and the implications for learning.

*Try to Get the Parents on the Floor* – It isn't always easy, but once it's done, parents will get back some of the joy of play. Don't force them into it, but anytime an opportunity presents itself for being on the floor, try to utilize it. It's a great way to help parents loosen up.

*Try to Bring Fathers Into the Group* – Many fathers are unaware that they may come and that they will be welcomed. A special effort is often needed. One way of effecting this welcome is through work. Fathers generally need more structured activities than mothers. Often they come with skills that are very usable at the Center and which, at the same time, serve to heighten the father's self-esteem and his position in the eyes of his child. Artistic and musical talents, mechanical and woodworking skills, can go a long way toward making the father comfortable with his new involvement.

*Know Your Community* – Be aware of customs, interests, hopes, problems and fears of the community. Your understanding of these factors will soon be felt by the parents and will help to establish better rapport.

*Plan "Alone" Time* – Planning "alone" time for parent and child is an effective tool in communication. Its success lies more in *what* is done rather than in the quantity of time available. Children react to attitudes and feelings and they often appreciate a half-hour of a parent's time well-spent than a longer period. *What is felt* in this half hour is more important than what is done.

The "Family Hour" is often an excellent time for parent and child to be together, since for many parents, the pressures of job and of homemaking frequently prevent them from "playing" with their children. They can do so here without the strain that often makes parent-child interaction a negative experience for both.

Look for those situations – and they are not as rare as you may think – in which the child can actually go to work with the parent. It enables the child to see how the parent spends time away from home and how

the parent earns a living. It can be an excellent way to bring parent and child closer together.

*Utilize Parents for New Recruits* – Parents who feel at home in the group may wish to assist in recruiting parents not yet involved. Once identified with the program, parents often want to function in a paraprofessional role by making home visits to new or non-participating parents. At this point, it is also desirable to encourage them to begin assisting in the role of the host at the Center.

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

*Storytelling* – This activity holds a never-ending charm for children and one need not be a professional to do it well. Encourage parents to tell of their past, of their countries of origin, and to bring possessions that reflect Old World customs. Several of the abovementioned items – tape recorder, books, pictures – can enhance a storytelling session.

*Trip Planning* – This may be done during the parent hour and carried out at a later time: ideally with parents in attendance, but not necessarily, if their schedules do not permit.

1) Discuss briefly the value of trips; mention several possible trips.

2) Ask parents for their suggestions on where to go and what to do.

3) When possible, ask parents to get information for you. Be attuned to the possibility that some parents may not be ready to do this out of shyness or because they don't know how to go about it; the process of getting information might conceivably be part of the discussion itself.

4) Get parents to discuss the neighborhood in which they live or in which your program is located. Help them to see the value of trips to the local parks, a pet shop, a hardware store, a church or temple of a religion other than their own. Find out if a local industry has a guided tour of its plant. (If not, why not? Maybe this is something you and the parents can initiate.) If you're visiting a store or some place not usual to "tourists," you might want to ask a parent to do a preliminary visit to the store owner to prepare him for the visit.

*Trip Suggestions* – The following trip suggestions are for New York City and vicinity, but there are ideas here for anywhere inside or out of the United States:



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Picnics in parks of the five boroughs, a visit to a firehouse, a boat ride to Staten Island (still costs an incredible 5¢), a trip to a local airport, the South Street Seaport Museum, the Children's Zoo in Central Park, an afternoon at a children's theatre (film, live or puppet – and some of them free); investigate the Discovery Room of the Museum of Natural History – this room is designed especially for children who are invited to touch everything, crawl around, and, in general, to do all the things that are normally forbidden in museums. Inquire about group rates for such attractions as around Manhattan Circle Line boat rides. Take a breathtaking ride to the top of the Empire State Building. Make an excursion to another ethnic neighborhood – Chinatown, Little Italy, etc. Consult Cue Magazine or the New York Almanac, the New Yorker or New York Magazine for their listings on children's events. The New York Times (every Wednesday on the Family/Style page) and the Village Voice also list announcements of current interest. Do not hesitate to call the Department of Parks – they have information on all outdoor (and some indoor) activities to be held under their jurisdiction, and much of it will not be found in any other way. For a recorded account of events, call 755-4100; for special questions, call 472-1003. A call to the New York Convention & Visitors Bureau (687-1300) will net a wealth of information on doings other than those sponsored by the Parks Department. You may also request that they send you their quarterly *Calendar of Events, Tour Leader's Guide,* the *Guide to New York Landmarks.* You are welcome to stop in at their offices – 90 East 42nd Street – for helpful maps and brochures. For all information on interborough travel, call UL 2-5000. These are public services, so take advantage of them.

*NOTE:* Remember to call in advance to make arrangements for group visits and be sure to inquire about *group rates.*

*Puppet and theatre making* provide an excellent opportunity for staff, parents and children to become jointly absorbed in a project. It doesn't matter if they are working together directly or if they are working independently, the project unites them. Some parents may wish to sit and observe first; others will want to begin immediately. You may wish to work in the beginning with small groups of parents or with small groups of children mixed with parents: your decision should depend on the circumstances and the mood. Warning: avoid coercion since some parents are genuinely threatened by being asked to do things.

1) Describe to the parents the general look of the theatre as well as the functioning of its component parts, e.g. wings, apron, proscenium.



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2) Allow the parents to decide how to divide up the work.

3) Demonstrate how to make a variety of puppets. While doing so, explain how puppets can be used as the basis for numerous learning experiences.

4) Get suggestions from the parents for ideas on costuming the puppets.

Parents will be amazed at what can be communicated through the use of puppets. Depending on the situation, you may want to interpret some of what is being "said" by the puppets.

*Involve Parents in Other Activities* – Consider carefully the possibility of using parents to organize and arrange parties for national or ethnic holidays or for general social activities such as luncheons or dinners. These can be made interesting by using the pot-luck system in which each member of the parent group contributes a dish of her own making. It can also be used as a fund-raising device. A planning committee for this kind of event is essential and becomes an important function in forming a cohesive parent community. (Don't overlook the value to a parent and the child of bringing a dish that represents their own ethnicity.)

And now for some warnings!

## PROBLEMS, PITFALLS, AND ADVERSE REACTIONS

The "Family Hour" idea has worked extremely well in many places. Success is not automatic, however, and staff members must be prepared for parental objections made on a variety of grounds. Some parents do not feel wanted by the staff and doubt the sincerity of the invitation; others can be threatened by teachers whom they view in authoritarian roles; still others believe they will be uncomfortable in such a setting because of lingual, economic, occupational, ethnic or social differences. The staff will occasionally have to exert considerable effort to help them overcome these obstacles. However, once convinced that their involvement is honestly desired, the parents will respond. Staff acceptance of the likes, dislikes, abilities, limitations, fears, and expectations of the parents will engender rapport and a spirit of cooperation that might otherwise be difficult to achieve.

Children, too, occasionally manifest an adverse reaction to the "Family Hour." A child may feel anxiety at seeing his parent enter "his world." He may be embarrassed at seeing a parent use play materials or play games. If this is a role in which he has never seen his parent, it constitutes a possible threat; namely, invasion of his special and inviolate place. Happily, this is not a frequent occurrence. When it does happen, however, it should be open-



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ly (but privately) discussed between the parent and teacher in order to find the cause and attempt to alleviate the child's tension. The negatives as well as the positives should be equally well-understood. After all, deeper insight into the parent-child relationship is one of the fundamental reasons for the existence of the "Family Hour."

Parents and children are not the only ones faced with feelings of discomfort. Staff are also confronted by difficult situations that may cause them acute anxiety. The most common are:

1) Feeling of discomfort at meeting parents.
2) Possible loss of group control.
3) Possible parental interference and the problem of coping with it.
4) Fear of criticism and lack of acceptance from parents centered around disapproval of their methods of working with children.
5) Language and cultural barriers.
6) Lack of tolerance for the problems and foibles of parents. (Many teachers are tolerant of temper tantrums or hostility in children, but have difficulty in transferring this degree of patience of parents.)

The following are recommendations gathered from various groups after they had launched their programs and were able to evaluate the total effect of their efforts:

1) It is the responsibility of the staff to interpret *at the start* the objectives involved in the family-centered approach to a program.
2) Try to plan content and methods of the "Family Hour" with a steering committee of parents before setting up the program.
3) Staff who are selected to work with parents should not be involved in any other project at the same time.
4) Each organization should work at its *own* pace toward developing a strong program with the children and their parents.
5) It must be explained to parents that noise does not necessarily indicate chaos.
6) Special skills evolving from music, reading, mechanical-arithmetical activities, dancing, educational games, arts and crafts can be developed in each Center as the teachers and parents are ready.
7) Plan for quiet periods. There need not always be the hustle and bustle of activities.
8) Allow time for periodic staff evaluation of the "Family Hour." This is especially important in the early weeks of the new program.



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The evidence points to the fact that the "Family Hour" can be important to all members of the family, even those indirectly involved, and it is certainly of help to staff, as you will see by the following:

*EVALUATIONS AND COMMENTS* – From staff of various organizations which have initiated the "Family Hour," Play Schools Association has received many comments and evaluations, a few of which are reprinted here:

". . . the informal atmosphere helps the parents to relax, encourages them to remain, and makes the Center a pleasant place to visit at the end of a working day."

". . . though it is easier for many parents to remain after pick-up time, do not overlook the potential help from parents who are available at other times of the day."

". . . through working together, the staff is becoming acquainted with parents as individuals rather than simply viewing them as an anonymous group."

". . . staff is discovering that the parents have something of value to contribute toward increased understanding of the children's behavior."

". . . it is now realized that staff need not be Parent Education Specialists or particularly skilled in group leadership techniques to maintain good working relationships with parents. Using a practical philosophy, some simple techniques, and common sense, staff can adapt themselves and their work to the needs of parents who, very obviously, prefer friendly and constructive exchange to lectures."

". . . one aspect enjoyed by all the children and most of the parents is the occasion on which the child can teach the parent how to do something that he/she (the parent) has never done before. This often happens during the puppet-making project."

". . . these periods serve as practical demonstrations of how children learn through play."

". . . the parents develop a real understanding of an activity-oriented educational program."

". . . comments by two parents: 'How much he enjoys having my exclusive attention. This is almost impossible at home with a large family.' And: 'Sometimes I feel guilty being able to give her so little time. I work and it's hard. This kind of makes up for it – we can be together for awhile, having fun and learning.'"



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**Additional publications available at Play Schools Association:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Music Is Fun For Children | $ 1.50 |
| Play With A Difference (Report on Educational Recreational Play Program for the Severely Retarded) | 1.00 |
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## FILMS

"PLAY IN THE HOSPITAL" – This documentary is a firsthand report on the many ways young children benefit from original play programs in hospitals. It is designed as a new concept in training films; however, its scope is broad enough to hold the interest of all, including the uninitiated lay person.

"BLOCKS" – Large building blocks enable children to recreate aspects of the world around them. In their play they help children to test and control their environment. This 16 mm film shows how children use them: it shows how you can use them to understand children.

"AND SO THEY GROW" – This 16 mm film highlights the role of the leader in a play program. It shows the interaction of groups and demonstrates how children socialize in play situations. It also instructs in methods of providing children with individualized attention.

For information on rental or purchase write to:
Play Schools Association, Inc.
Campus Film Distributors Corporation
2 Overhill Road
Scarsdale, N.Y. 10583

**The Play Schools Association**
111 East 59th Street · New York, N.Y. 10022



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Play Schools Association is a consultation and training agency utilizing play/activities as an educational, therapeutic and recreational tool to benefit children. Services include curriculum development; testing and evaluating educational equipment, materials, methods in teaching both normal and handicapped children, training professionals, paraprofessionals, parents and volunteers. The Association is currently working in partnership with the New York City Board of Education as well as other public and private organizations such as schools, community centers, hospitals, institutions and day camps. Programs are devised for children who are emotionally and physically handicapped, mentally retarded, brain-injured, and hospitalized for physical sickness. The Agency serves normal children, delinquent children, dependent and neglected children, and children with learning disabilities. Techniques are constantly updated by educational consultants trained in early childhood, elementary, secondary and special education. The Agency produces films and publications for use in child development and child psychology courses, teacher training programs, day care training, recreation, parent education and in-service as well as pre-service training. Pamphlets, slides and sound films are available for research training material.

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